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# WHAT'S PAY GOT TO DO WITH IT? COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE AMERICORPS PROGRAM

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WHAT'S PAY GOT TO DO WITH IT?  
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE AMERICORPS PROGRAM

by

RYAN CERESOLA

B.A. Pacific Lutheran University, 2009

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Masters of Arts.

Department of Sociology  
in the Graduate School  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

RYAN GUY CERESOLA, for the MASTER OF ARTS degree in SOCIOLOGY, presented on 4/12/2013, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

**TITLE: WHAT'S PAY GOT TO DO WITH IT? COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE AMERICORPS PROGRAM**

**MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Kelsy Kretschmer**

It is clear that Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) aim to recruit and retain members, and most do so by promoting some sort of collective identity formation. What is unclear, however, is the role of extrinsic rewards in promoting collective identity formation in SMO members. To address this issue, I use AmeriCorps to investigate the consequences extrinsic rewards have on collective identity formation. Based on twenty-two interviews with a diverse sample of AmeriCorps members, I find AmeriCorps members do not express a sense of collective identity with their fellow members with reference to the work they do, the values they have, and their reasons for service. Instead, I find that AmeriCorps members found a sense of collective identity through the extrinsic reward of pay. Therefore, I find that collective identity can be formed through the use of extrinsic rewards, but it might not be the collective identity promoted by the SMO.

How do Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) get people to do what the organization needs them to do? How do members become involved in these SMOs, and what makes them stay and continue to work? Many scholars point to the formation of a collective identity, which is a sense of “emergent shared beliefs about membership, boundaries, and activities of a social movement held by movement members” (Stryker, Owens and White 2000:6), as key in retaining members, especially productive members. While some social movements use extrinsic rewards like pay, stipends, or honorariums to engage and retain members, some scholars have argued that extrinsic rewards, or resources given to individuals in exchange for their service (Mottaz 1985), work at cross purposes to developing a sense of collective identity. Specifically, the argument is that people will convince themselves that their work is less meaningful if they are paid for it, because it will then not be something that they do of their own free will and, by association, choice (Aronson 2008). In this paper, I use AmeriCorps to investigate the consequences of extrinsic rewards for collective identity formation.

Established in 1994, AmeriCorps annually enlists 75,000 members to volunteer for national community service in approximately 15,000 service locations (NCS 2013) and provides a living stipend in the amount of approximately \$10,000/year and an education award of approximately \$5,500 for student loans, for its members (AmeriCorps 2012b). AmeriCorps promotes an image of its members as selfless, committed to service, and altruistic (AmeriCorps 2012a). Members engage in forty-hour-a-week-plus time commitments, wherein they often volunteer in positions of like helping to run after-school tutoring centers, working with homeless youth, or building trails, to name a few pathways. Therefore, we have two parts of an equation – time-consuming service work, and extrinsic rewards in the form of a stipend – which raises the

question: do extrinsic rewards, such as pay, disengage individuals from forming a collective identity with reference to a SMO's ideology?

Based on twenty-two interviews with a diverse sample of AmeriCorps members, I find AmeriCorps members do not express a sense of collective identity with their fellow members with reference to the work they do, the values they have, and their reasons for service. But counterintuitively, I do find that AmeriCorps members found a sense of collective identity through one experience they all had in common: their extrinsic reward of pay. Therefore, I find that collective identity can be formed through the use of extrinsic rewards, but it might not be the collective identity that the SMO would imagine or prefer to be formed.

### **Collective Identity in Social Movements**

People join groups for many reasons, be they deprived of a political voice or other resources offered by a certain group (Gates and Steane 2009), searching for community (Hoffer 1951), or because of social expectations (Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Some individuals join social movements if they already feel passionately about a particular issue (McAdam 1989). On the other hand, some argue joining a social movement might not be pre-meditated. In studying pro-life activists, for example, Munson (2008) found that joining an SMO might mean an individual enters with an unformed ideology about an issue, which the group slowly forms in the individual's mind. In another example, individuals who participated in the Mississippi Freedom summer entered into an SMO with some social awareness, but were more social-change oriented after their experience (McAdam 1989). Finally, SMO entrance occurs at specific time periods conducive to movement entrance in individual's lives (Dillon and Wink 2007), which furthers the idea that SMO entrance is contingent on life circumstances instead of formed ideologies.

Many SMOs attempt to foster a sense of collective identity in their members because of the benefits that SMOs experience when individuals have formed such a collective identity. ). Collective identity refers to “emergent shared beliefs about membership, boundaries, and activities of a social movement held by movement members” (Stryker, Owens and White 2000:6). , and people adopt a collective identity when their group identity becomes most meaningful to them, in comparison to their other identities. Members with internalized collective identities are more likely to stay longer and work harder than individuals who have not adopted a collective identity (Owens, Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2010). Collective identity forms through individual interpretation of identities and through group work based on an “identity salience structure” in an individual’s system of beliefs (Stryker 2007). This means that the more salient an identity, the more likely its invocation in a situation that allows some agency or choice by the actor (Owens, Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2010). In short, if one connects with a particular identity and bonds with people who reinforce that identity, then that identity will be the one an individual often refers to in making important decisions about how to live and how to act. Further, if members internalize the collective identity of the group, that internalization can dramatically change and affect the way members perceive of themselves as people, and lead to more group aid and interaction (Aronson 2008). Put another way, “when “the ‘we’ of the group becomes more central to one’s identity than one’s individual experiences...competing feelings are driven out by the main group feeling” (Summers-Effler 2002:59) and the individual’s perception of a group identity supplants his or her individual identity formation.

The tactics SMOs use to foster collective identity formation vary by organization, but might include having the members perform meaningful rituals that tie them together (Rochford 1985), structuring the organization around a core group of homogenous members which

promotes feelings of like-mindedness for those members with the SMO (Taylor 1989), or starting every day with cheers and rallying cries to invoke groupthink (Fisher 2006). These group activities establish what a collective identity looks like for members, and provide individuals the opportunity to internalize that identity. We can see this in the workplace, when members tend to “reciprocate an organization with their socioemotional attachment to it when the organization has benefitted the employees with fulfillment of some socioemotional needs” (He and Brown 2013:16); meaning that an organization that fulfills basic needs in an individual is more likely to be bonded with and internalized in an individual’s mind. Importantly, adopting a collective identity doesn’t only take place abruptly for individuals, as in the case of a death-bed religious conversion or a “brainwashing” into a cult (McAdam and Paulsen 1993), but can be more gradual. While SMOs vary in tactics of fostering this identity, much like they vary in tactics to elicit social change, the goal remains the same – to create a stronger, more active, and more engaged member.

### **The Critique of Extrinsic Rewards on Collective Identity**

Why couldn’t SMOs just create hard-working and engaged members by paying them off? Other than the reality that many SMOs operate with no or low budgets, many scholars point out that extrinsic rewards, rewards that are “provided by the organization for the purpose of facilitating or motivating task performance” (Mottaz 1985:366), might negatively affect identity internalization. While Staggenborg (1988) points out many benefits for the professionalization of a social movement, including lasting through periods of abeyance, research on collective identity formation and extrinsic rewards (the types of rewards that would become available in professionalization) has been mixed. Brophy (2008) found that rewarding students for completing tasks they were internally invested in decreased their drive to continue that behavior.



Studies on work also show that extrinsic rewards, like raises to salary, do not necessarily lead to higher job satisfaction ratings for most employees (Blyton and Jenkins 2007). This lack of internal drive might exist because, when individuals complete a task which they do not receive a reward for, they are more likely to tell themselves that the task was enjoyable and meaningful, and not a waste of their time; however, if rewarded for the task with external rewards, they are less likely to find value in that task (Aronson 2008; Deci 1971).

Empirically, scholars debate whether extrinsic rewards prevent individuals from forming a collective identity. For example, one study found that extrinsic rewards via extra credit points for students provided a strong incentive to volunteer for the first time, and there was no statistically significant difference in returning for volunteering regardless of the initial rational to participate (Glascoff, Baker and Glascoff 1997). This might be interpreted as a sign that extrinsic rewards are positive for involving people with groups that they may or may not have had a desire to enter into in the first place. However, in Dana Fisher's (2006) study on members working for different non-profit causes through canvassing and on-street educating and donation-receiving, many individuals felt disenchanted with the "People's Project" because of their lack of autonomy and the organizations focus on securing money over members. Here, the individuals are often advocating for causes that they care about, but even with, or perhaps because of, extrinsic pay many individuals do not continue to work for this SMO.

Given this context, I ask the following research question: how does the extrinsic reward of pay affect individuals' views on themselves and their AmeriCorps identities? Could extrinsic rewards actually *lead* to collective identity formation instead of impeding it? This has important ramifications for our understanding of best practices used to foster collective identity, and provides opportunities to understand how identity is formed in this unique context.

## **Data and Methods**

I conducted twenty-two in-depth interviews with AmeriCorps members from different sites across the country, gaining access to participants through existing contacts with AmeriCorps members in Washington and using snowball sampling of local members for Southern Illinois. The respondents represent diverse groups and backgrounds, and the purpose of this sample was to aim to reach a variety of respondents in terms of raised class, gender, and race. Interviews lasted from 33 minutes to 95 minutes with an average of 66 minutes and were conducted in coffee shops, over the phone, or at restaurants, depending on what location was most convenient for the respondent. My experience as an AmeriCorps member two years prior to this research made communicating with respondents easier because I was able to immediately relate to the subject with reference to various acronyms, nation-wide events (like, “service week”, and job descriptions.

The sample consisted of eight white women, six white men, two Latino men and two Latina women, two Asian/Pacific Islander men and one Asian/Pacific Islander woman, and one African-American woman for a total of twenty-two respondents. Eight respondents said they were raised lower class, nine respondents said they were raised middle class, and five respondents said they were raised upper or upper/middle class. Although not representative, this sample has sufficient diversity to assess many interpretations of the AmeriCorps experience.

Finally, one potential limitation of this study was that the sample was limited to college graduates or current college students, and therefore can only speak to those populations. Therefore, while the purpose of qualitative research is not generalizability, this particular research is specifically focused on a distinct group of AmeriCorps members – those that had attended, or were attending, college. However, I interpret this fact more as an asset than a

limitation. Specifically, I am looking at individuals who have, up to the point of becoming AmeriCorps members, accepted educational attainment as a path to further goals. Therefore, the findings might actually be more meaningful in discussing collective identity formation because 1) I am dealing with individuals with similar backgrounds who might be more likely to change their identities in similar ways; and 2) these individuals might interpret extrinsic rewards in the same way, given their background as college students.

Eight respondents were in their first year of service or had only served one year total in the program, twelve respondents were in their second year of service or had served for two years before exiting the program, and two respondents were in their third year of service. Of the eight respondents in the one year category, three individuals had received full-time employment after their first year of service, two reported graduating from college and leaving their service area and choosing not to re-enlist, one reported attempting to find a job in the field he served in instead of re-enlisting, and the remaining two reported a desire to re-enlist. Thus, only six individuals in my sample of twenty-two did not re-enlist in the program for a second year.

My interview guide included thematic and specific questions; while I was sure to ask each respondent the same basic questions as written on my guide, the interviewee was free to speak as much or as little about a topic that he or she deemed necessary. I used several questions to reach the idea of collective identity, all centering around individuals' senses of service, or the community that they felt within the team and with the individuals that they ended up serving. For example, I asked individuals their definitions of service, whether or not AmeriCorps fit in with their definition of service, and whether or not they considered themselves service-minded individuals. Questions about service served as a proxy for the trickier concept of collective identity, because it opened up the opportunity for individuals to discuss their perceptions of

service in line with the AmeriCorps ideology presented above. As shown, AmeriCorps ideology attempts to foster a sense of “oneness” with the AmeriCorps program (e.g. “I am an AmeriCorps member, and I will get things done” (AmeriCorps 2012a)). I also asked individuals if they felt a sense of community or identification with the AmeriCorps program, how they described themselves and their positions to non-AmeriCorps members, and how they experience AmeriCorps values of social change, community-orientation, and social action in their own lives.

After the interviews, I transcribed the results using NVivo software and line-coded each interview for emerging themes, which included “reasons for joining,” “ideas of ‘service’,” and “sense of belonging/community,” in addition to relevant themes that I had gleaned from the literature, such as “identity” and “team-work.” I then ranked these themes into mutually exclusive categories and analyzed the themes that emerged in the open coding of the interviews and the pre-determined codes from the literature. I paid particular attention to mentions of identity, senses of self, and service or social-change orientation.

### **Research Context: The AmeriCorps Program**

Established in 1994, AmeriCorps was originally touted as “President Clinton’s new national service program, the domestic Peace Corps” (Segal 1994). The Corporation for National and Community Service administers AmeriCorps, which consists of three subsections: AmeriCorps\*State and National, where members primarily works for local and state organizations as hands-on volunteers; AmeriCorps\*VISTA, where members are involved with administrative procedures and management of their volunteer sites; and AmeriCorps\*National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), where members are stationed in five cities across America and mobilize in the case of national disasters or emergencies (AmeriCorps NCCC n/d; Corporation for National and Community Service 2006).

In exchange for a 10- to 12-month term of service, members are given a monthly living stipend, student loan deferments, and an education award to help pay for future education or to pay back student loans that equals approximately \$5,550 (AmeriCorps 2012b). In 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) poverty guideline for an individual in all states except Hawaii and Alaska was \$11,170: those below live in poverty, those who are above are said not to (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). This guideline, or a percentage thereof like 125% or 200%, is used by federal agencies around the country like HHS and the Department of Labor to determine eligibility for federal assistance programs like Food Stamps or Family Planning Services, (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). AmeriCorps members earn approximately \$9,500 to \$10,900 annually depending on the cost of living of their service area (AmeriCorps 2012), firmly planting them within the guidelines to determine financial eligibility for service like food stamps and institutionally labeling them as people in poverty.

This is a different reality for most people entering into AmeriCorps: eighty-five percent of AmeriCorps members have working or middle-class backgrounds and 7% come from upper class backgrounds; 41% of the members are White, 25% African-American, and 24% Hispanic American, with American Indian, Asian American, Pacific Islander and Multi-racial making up the other 10%; and women make up 70% of the population (Marshall and Magee 2005). Findings show that AmeriCorps membership has civic benefits with comparatively few drawbacks for the individuals who serve. Researchers have found that AmeriCorps members are more likely to have a high level of civic engagement after their service than individuals who showed interest in AmeriCorps but did not join (Finlay, Flanagan and Wray-Lake 2011), and AmeriCorps members are not disproportionately likely to become either more liberal or more conservative because of

their service (Simon 2002). However, AmeriCorps members who live with the population they serve appreciate ethnic and cultural diversity slightly less, though this does subside over time (Frumkin et al. 2009). Overall, studies have shown a positive effect in civic engagement, cultural sensitivity, and community-mindedness for AmeriCorps members, especially once individuals are removed from service for a few years (Simon 2002).

Finally, AmeriCorps promotes its values to the public, members, and prospective members through literature and training: the ideal member is community-oriented, dedicated and generous, and uniquely identified as “AmeriCorps.” Promotional material states “members gain valuable professional, educational, and life benefits” and are “more likely to be civically engaged, to go into public service careers...and to volunteer in their communities” (NCS 2013). The White House officially stated members promote service which “strengthens the civic and economic fabric of our Nation” and that “our lives are made richer, our communities are drawn closer, and our country is forged stronger by the dedication and generous spirit of volunteers” (House 2012). Most dramatically, the AmeriCorps program expects members to adhere to “The AmeriCorps Pledge,” which contains statements like “I will bring Americans together and strengthen our communities,” “[f]aced with apathy, I will take action,” and “I am an AmeriCorps member, and I will get things done” (AmeriCorps 2012a). In sum, AmeriCorps promotes an image of altruism, the basic “situation in which an individual gives away something of value to benefit someone else” (Collins 2005:168).

## **Findings**

Individuals entered AmeriCorps for very different reasons, though most were instrumental, like finding a job. Those who stayed, on the other hand, claim their reason for re-enlisting was more altruistic and community-oriented. However, throughout the interviews the

overwhelming majority (twenty-one out of twenty-two) of respondents claimed to not maintain a sense of “AmeriCorps Identity,” conceptualized here as thinking of one’s primary identity as one of membership in AmeriCorps, or thinking of oneself as adopting or living the goals that AmeriCorps sets for its members of community-orientation, service-mindedness, and action. Furthermore, individuals approach the AmeriCorps program in a way that is very individualized – members report drastically different understandings of what the AmeriCorps program means to them.

While this might suggest that AmeriCorps members do not adopt a collective identity, one recurring theme throughout almost all of my interviews was AmeriCorps members pointing to their interactions with each other and their stipends as providing a sense of community and togetherness, fostering a collective identity *around* the extrinsic rewards instead of *despite* of those rewards. AmeriCorps members did not form a collective identity around the values of being an AmeriCorps member; instead they formed a collective identity around their shared economic position, specifically their transient and middle-class-orientation to “real” poverty.

However, to fully understand how AmeriCorps members *do* form a collective identity around extrinsic rewards, it is necessary to first understand how members do *not* form a collective identity around training or motivational elements of service. This is important because understanding how members do not consider themselves to be part of a collective based on the values and norms of the organization allows us to more clearly see the impact of extrinsic rewards on a specific type of collective identity formation. I begin with two sections: a section discussing opportunities for collective identity formation, and then a section detailing how this change does not occur, for that purpose.

### *Individual Identifications with AmeriCorps*

My respondents reported joining AmeriCorps for instrumental reasons, but re-enlisting for altruistic reasons, otherwise known as reasons where individuals give away something of value from themselves to benefit others (Collins 2005). Eighteen out of twenty-two respondents reported needing a job as a reason for joining AmeriCorps (which makes sense because AmeriCorps' 40-hour a week commitment), and ten stated that the primary reason for joining was to find employment. Similarly, five individuals reported being recruited into the program by program coordinators who emphasized the benefit of AmeriCorps as a job, and the remaining three stumbled upon AmeriCorps accidentally, having applied for positions that turned out to be AmeriCorps. William, a white twenty-four year old who worked at an after-school tutoring program, sums up many respondents' views of entering AmeriCorps, saying, "AmeriCorps was not like an all-time career goal, yet here I am." This type of entrance signifies that these individuals did not enter into AmeriCorps with the goal of serving, but did it more to find employment.

The idea of finding employment was a salient theme throughout individuals' decisions to join. Dawn, a white twenty-three year old, said "I thought it would be a good way to stay in T [place of college and service] and have a job." She also pointed out AmeriCorps "fit" with her goals for after college because of its relatively straightforward 10 and a half month employment opportunity. Ariel, a white twenty-four year old, went on to say she was not alone in applying because she needed a job, at least in her view of other joining: "I mean the vast majority of people I know that joined AmeriCorps were, you know, young people who had just finished college who have some sort of liberal arts degree and the idea of doing something service-y is either appealing intrinsically or it's appealing because they can't get another type of job." Here,



Ariel acknowledges both the internal and external reasons individuals might engage with a service oriented career.

In fact, only two members, both females of color who identified themselves as coming from low-income backgrounds, pointed to their sole reason for joining AmeriCorps as community oriented or service oriented. Interestingly, both members had been employed or had other job opportunities at the time, but had chosen AmeriCorps service instead of their current path. Natalie, a twenty-four year old Latina, felt a strong desire to serve somehow in high school, but was not afforded the opportunity because she reported needing to work: she “served” by providing money to her own family. Similarly, Shanice, a twenty-four year old African-American woman, said that she had a strong urge to go back home and serve the community that she had grown up in and “coming back to Tacoma was, like, the only thing that made sense to me.” She had also reported a strong desire to serve her community as a youth, but instead ended up serving her family by finding employment to help ends meet. While this group is small, it suggests that some people with certain intersections of race, class and gender, might be more likely to join AmeriCorps for altruistic reasons than the majority of members.

While twenty members (out of twenty two) reported joining for instrumental reasons, of the sixteen who continued or said they were continuing for a second year, fifteen members said that the reasons for staying were altruistic. In fact, while there were many reasons offered for joining, the reasons for staying fell into two categories, with some overlap of members providing two reasons for staying: a desire to serve as part of one’s life goals especially with reference to other possible employment opportunities, and a desire to fulfill one’s duty because the member was in the middle of “unfinished business” that required his or her reenlistment: all members but one provided these as the only two reasons for reenlisting.

Ten members reported that their ideas about themselves changed after the first year of service, and that they found benefits in the program that they had not thought they would experience, which led to their re-enlistment. Betty, a white twenty-one year old, who said she had no idea what AmeriCorps was when originally joining, said, “I don't think of it as just a job anymore... it's more than that. Just like being able to work with children or being in an environment that's very uplifting. It's, it's very good.” As another example, Hannah, a twenty-five year old Latina, reported, to her surprise, she found herself to:

Like the work that I'm doing with kids. I really did not think that I was going to like it, like, you know, the direct service stuff... So it's still rewarding and I like what I do and I don't know, if I went into the forest service, if I find an archeology job, that this is what I would do, but I would hope I could do some outreach.

Hannah, who had opportunities to enter into archeology employment before and during her service, reported that the reason she re-enlisted in AmeriCorps was because she learned that the teaching aspect of herself was a part of her she wanted to nurture. Seven respondents reported a sense of calling, or “unfinished business” as their major reason to reenlist. These reasons ranged from a desire to maintain ties with those that the AmeriCorps members served, as in the case of Natalie postponing a future goal of entering the Peace Corps because, “I didn't want to leave my kids,” as well as feeling explicitly called to community work because of the need perceived in the community

Individuals mention some sort of change that has overcome them, and an argument could be made that this is collective identity formation because various individuals changed their rationales for service in the same way. However, in the sense of collective identity formation, there is no sense of emergent *shared* beliefs. Despite

AmeriCorps members' changing rationales for service, collective identity formation occurs when individuals, *together*, form a sense of what AmeriCorps is, and "buy into" the goals and values of the AmeriCorps program. In fact, twenty-one of my respondents either suggested or explicitly stated that they did not identify themselves with a collective identity fostered in the AmeriCorps program. To address whether individuals adopted a collective identity in line with a group, we must look towards individual's interpretations of themselves within the context of AmeriCorps.

### *The AmeriCorps Identity?*

The question remains: do AmeriCorps members believe they had some sort of collective identity formation, meaning "emergent shared beliefs about membership, boundaries, and activities of a social movement" (Stryker, Owens and White 2000:6), especially given their changing reasons for staying in the program? What instead seems to happen is that AmeriCorps furthers people's own conceptualizations of what service is, or disengages individuals who did not fit into the idea of service espoused by AmeriCorps.

My findings suggest that either the unique nature of the AmeriCorps program as an agency which "farms out" volunteer work to other agencies does not foster, or the people who join AmeriCorps do not internalize, a sense of collective identity with reference to the goals and the attitudes of the AmeriCorps Identity. Instead of changing individuals' senses of selves, AmeriCorps merely added to their conceptualizations of service, or in some instances changed ideas in individuals' minds about what service entailed. For example, Hannah, who mentioned that she did not expect herself to enjoy working with kids, also reported that she believed outreach was a great way to become involved with the community *before* her AmeriCorps experience, but just did not think of

herself as capable to do so. As another example, James, a white twenty-eight year old, spoke about how AmeriCorps resonated with his understanding of service:

I really appreciated AmeriCorps because you can't be focused on one particular issue - you can't be focused on one agenda per se, because you've got people from all walks of life within the government going over your mission, going over your philosophy, and kind of making sure you're benefiting as many people as you can and not just a select few.

Here James mentions that AmeriCorps, in part because of its governmental approach to solving social problems, offers members opportunities to serve in many different ways, which did not instill a value of *the* correct way to serve, but instead allowed members to form their own choices about what service entailed. Others echoed this comment, picking and choosing aspects of the AmeriCorps identity which most benefit their preconceived notions. Veronica most appreciated the activist/action standpoint of the AmeriCorps identity:

So, I really like that the motto is getting things done because I don't, I don't like to stand still, figuratively or literally. Like, I feel the need to be in motion, and so the fact that we constantly have options for service projects and things like that, I really think it's a good idea.

In addition, Tina mentioned being more committed to service as volunteer work than to social change on a global scale; Betty responded most positively to the ideals that AmeriCorps presented; and Riley pointed out that AmeriCorps presented many competing ways of thought about how to serve, which an individual could uniquely use as his or her version of service. In sum, individuals found in AmeriCorps the type of service

that they most came into the program valuing.

Another reason AmeriCorps members reported not conceptualizing themselves with an AmeriCorps identity was because they did not “fit in” with the established group of AmeriCorps members who were serving on their team. Diane, who had worked as a professor for seven years, before becoming an AmeriCorps member stated, “It wasn't something like, ‘I don't feel right - I don't fit in,’ it's like ‘Oh, these people are more intense than me.’ And I knew going in, you know, that my situation was totally different, so it didn't bother me in the least bit.” This theme returned often, with other members reporting that their situations were unique in the way that they did not consider themselves to be AmeriCorps members in the traditional sense: ironically, many members reported feeling like their instrumental reason for joining, or their lack of a sense of being a social change agent was abnormal to the group, when, interestingly enough, reporting one felt different than the others was very common.

Only one respondent claimed that she internalized an “AmeriCorps Identity,” likening her collective understanding of the group with military service and saying it something everyone who had served in AmeriCorps could relate to. Janice says:

It's provided me with a bit of an identity... I don't know how many AmeriCorps people I joined with the first thing they told me was I am an AmeriCorps member because I just want to be AmeriCorps. I don't really feel like that's the first drive in the factory is to be an AmeriCorps member. But, once you're part of the group – I think that changes.

Here, Janice explicitly uses the language of identity formation to say that AmeriCorps has changed her internalized view of herself. She says that she can tell non-members, “I'm an

AmeriCorps member,” and they would not understand her experience as well as other AmeriCorps members, who she feels a unique identity with.

Despite Janice’s assertion that she did feel a strong sense of membership with the group and understood what the group was all about, she was alone in my sample in stating AmeriCorps helped her construct an image of herself, suggesting that her preconceived notion of service might have been connected with forming a service-minded identity, as members mentioned above found aspects of service that already gelled with their conceptualizations. Overall, there was no distinguishable trend of individuals conceptualizing of themselves primarily or even secondarily as AmeriCorps workers because of different sites, differential social positions in the sites, and different reasons for joining and understanding of service. These findings suggest AmeriCorps members do not internalize a collective identity in terms of the goals of the AmeriCorps program. With this knowledge, it is now appropriate to see if extrinsic rewards affect collective identity formation in some way, because AmeriCorps members had no sense of collective identity in conversations void of talk on extrinsic rewards.

#### *The Role of Extrinsic Rewards on Collective Identity*

There was one area where collective identity was clearly and explicitly adopted by my sample: the role of being paid “volunteer wages.” The fact that all AmeriCorps members are paid might lead to the low level of AmeriCorps identity formation in respondents, according to research on extrinsic rewards relationship with internal drive. Surprisingly, though, almost all of the total respondents (nineteen) did state adopting a collective identity around the issue of pay. Respondents pointed to these extrinsic rewards as difficult to manage because of their limitations in spending, but ultimately

beneficial for instilling in them the idea of what an AmeriCorps member actually was because it broke the member off from the “mainstream society,” further cemented their ties with their co-workers, and gave them a sense of a more meaningful service.

First, the AmeriCorps member reported breaking off ties with some individuals who were not on food stamps or part of the AmeriCorps community, for monetary reasons. Daniel mentioned finding a gap between himself and work colleagues when he said, “I quickly realized there was a wage disparity between me and, say, the social workers I was working with; or me and, say, even the full time staff in the organization.” As another example, Hannah reported losing out on opportunities to bond socially with non-AmeriCorps workers, “I don't go out to eat, I can't go out for drinks, and I think some of that's been hard because I feel like I'm really anti-social.” Most explicitly, Robert mentioned how his pre-AmeriCorps friends felt about him joining the program, when he said, “They say, you volunteer to live below the poverty line? Are you crazy?” In sum, AmeriCorps members disengage from the social norms and economic values of mainstream society, isolating from old friends and colleagues, though not totally by choice but by financial and time constraints.

Given this structural context, AmeriCorps members found an opportunity to bond over their low wages with fellow members. For example, Ariel reported on the camaraderie of being on food stamps:

After a while it sort of like a camaraderie thing that my AmeriCorps friends and I would joke about, like, ‘oh yeah, today I spent ten dollars [on food stamps] on a sandwich someone made for me and some soup for lunch,’ and we just kind of joked about it, and we kind of had this place that we'd go to regularly and it wasn't that big

of a deal anymore because we were just kind of used to it being a perk of the job that we kind of laughed off.

Gabriel also mentioned how applying for food stamps and using the EBT food stamps card at groceries stores fostered a group mentality towards living below the poverty line, “honestly, among the group, I think everyone just kind of had the understanding that this is just what you do while you're on AmeriCorps.” In living with this pay, AmeriCorps members formed a group bond that was not apparent in their reasons for joining, staying, or perceptions of what AmeriCorps was all about.

Members also reported the extrinsic rewards in combination with team activities and conversations as major ways they learned what it meant to be an AmeriCorps member. For example, Jeremy, a twenty-four year old Samoan/Korean, reported, “having that experience to talk about stuff with your team members, like your frustrations or your resources and hear what they're doing - I think I loved it; I loved having a team.” Jeremy’s “resources” included the extrinsic rewards of service, and talking about that with others made him feel more connected and part of the community. As another example, William said:

I might have felt [shame for using food stamps] more if I wasn't in a team, like the Urban Leaders in Training [AmeriCorps group] team. Knowing that there were, like, thirty of us that were all getting those - we weren't all in line together but knowing that and living in this peace house; I was going to live with four other people with food stamps it was kind of in this food stamp community of sorts.

This “food stamp community” statement points to the idea that though William did not relate to other members through a collective identity where he shared values of service with other members, the collective unifier, instead, was a middle-class into lower-class experience with



poverty that was relatable for most members. William reflects and interprets his pay as something that he could relate to his other AmeriCorps workers with – the pay actually cemented this idea of collectivity, as evident when he uses the phrase, “there were, like, thirty of us that were all getting those.” His use of the word “us” signifies he considers himself part of a collective. Interestingly, William uses this strong language about collective identity when talking about his extrinsic rewards, not about a shared sense of service.

What is most important about these members breaking away from previous ties and forming new ties with current members is that individuals are structurally forced to disengage from the mainstream society, not so much that they choose to “self-isolate.” Their poverty wages put them structurally in a different economic position which limits the amount of time they can spend with friends engaging in activities that a higher income or more free time would allow. This separation does not stem from a change in one’s feelings towards service, but instead the structural differences between AmeriCorps members with reference to a lack of free time and low pay provide the framework that allows individuals to build a collective identity with other AmeriCorps members around those same structural differences.

Finally, while one critique of the money and food stamps AmeriCorps members receive is that these rewards would make their experience with AmeriCorps less meaningful (Mottaz 1985), these respondents pointed to the idea that the stipend was actually something that benefited their understanding of being an AmeriCorps member. William points to the pay as a beneficial way to relate and understand others:

I think I was more comfortable doing this position with this pay scale than I would with having more money, because I felt like it was more reflective of the people I was working with... It was the way for me to kind of backhanded connect and feel

like I was among them. Having food stamps, having a lower pay scale, I could go to the grocery store and in a degree fit in in a way that I wouldn't have otherwise.

William points out that the food stamps card and the low pay allowed him to relate to the individuals he was serving in a way that was the same as many individuals in AmeriCorps were relating to them. Ariel also spoke to the idea, that in some “backwards sort of way,” her wages helped her relate to the population she served, thus recasting her self-image as “one who serves others,” (i.e. an aspect of the AmeriCorps Identity). Here, extrinsic rewards for joining the program facilitate, instead of impede the formation of a service identity.

Furthermore, Chuck pointed out how the extrinsic rewards of AmeriCorps actually opened up opportunities for individuals to explore and understand the community they are a part of, a major tenet of the “AmeriCorps” identity:

I'm still able to go out and do stuff. Like, that's a little bit of what the AmeriCorps stipend is for. It's to go out and experience the community that you're serving in, so it's, yeah, it's a little bit different to try to watch what your spending but then again you're supposed to be living in that community - you're supposed to be a community member, so it's actually going and doing the stuff that actually makes you a community member.

Others pointed out the benefit of going to free community events, or spending more time at home with friends instead of going out to restaurants and bars. In part because community event attendance were required by some service sites, and in part because members had no better way to spend their time with limited funds, becoming more grounded in the community was a common statement of AmeriCorps members.

To sum up, the extrinsic rewards of payment did not seem to remove individuals from a

sense of collective identity, but instead fostered in individuals a belief that “they were all in this together,” thus instilling a sense of collective identity, or at least more of a sense of collective identity than one formed in AmeriCorps service. While members do not explicitly say they felt a sense of collective identity, their transformation from joining for instrumental reasons to joining for altruistic reasons shows that there was some sort of identity transformation in the program, and the extrinsic rewards offered to them might be one of the major ways that identity transforms.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

I found that AmeriCorps members have drastically different conceptualizations of what AmeriCorps is about, what their individual goals are in the program, and what the reason for joining and staying in the program are. This contradicts the “AmeriCorps ideology” presented by the program, and shows a more subjective approach for entering this SMO, in line with the differential reasons people join many SMOs. Perhaps because of the differential rationales for entrance, all but one of my respondents reported not embracing a sense of identity in terms of social change, service, or being known as an “AmeriCorps member,” despite the fact that most (sixteen out of twenty-two) of the respondents returned for a second year of service or were planning on doing so. This might suggest that collective identity formation does not occur with reference to AmeriCorps ideals, in the definition of shared emergent beliefs.

However, the place where members *did* gain a sense of collective identity was when they interacted with each other and their extrinsic rewards of pay, although the identity espoused is not that of a volunteer by heart, but that of one who is paid very little. This complicates existing literature on the role of extrinsic rewards on collective identity formation: sure enough, extrinsic rewards actually facilitated collective identity formation. However, the identity that was formed

was not in line with the identity the AmeriCorps program presents as that of an AmeriCorps member. Before providing suggestions for future research, however, there are three major elements of this research that need more analysis. One critique of this research, however, is that the findings do not say if having any money at all helped build the collective identity, or if it was the fact that it was just a small amount of money that led to the identity formation. Once again, future research should test different levels of extrinsic rewards and their relative effects on collective identity formation.

One final note: these claims specifically speak to a young, educated group of members who have middle-class backgrounds and values, and who are transient poor. In this sense not making much money brings these individuals together stemming from trying to negotiate blocked privileges in ways with which they are not familiar. While several of my respondents did report coming from low-income families, the fact that they had gone through college implies a commitment to middle-class norms and beliefs. Therefore, not having the understanding of life that emerges from “really” being poor raises important discussion points detailed below.

*The Transition from Instrumental Reasons for Joining and Altruistic Reasons for Staying*

This research shows that individuals had drastically different reasons for entering into AmeriCorps than the idea of one who is pre-socialized into a service-oriented identity. Prospective members enter with only a minimal sense of social commitment or service to others in common, and almost all report joining solely for instrumental reasons. However, this changes when individuals discuss why they wish to renew, citing more altruistic reasons. This implies that AmeriCorps members change self-conceptions in ways that are cogent and adaptable with AmeriCorps’ agenda, while still not totally reaching a sense of collective identity, because an

“AmeriCorps Identity” is more altruistic and service-minded according to training and promotional material.

While AmeriCorps members did not internalize a collective “AmeriCorps Identity,” they did acknowledge that AmeriCorps affected them in tangible ways, despite AmeriCorps failing to socialize individuals ideologically because of the program’s limited direct training or influence on individuals. I find that the reasons for these changes is not because individuals adopt an AmeriCorps identity, but because AmeriCorps taps into the preconceived notions individuals have about service, and reinforce those ideas. Individuals did not report staying for the *same* altruistic reasons as other individuals, but they framed their reasons for reenlisting in the terms which most explained their previous thoughts about service before entering service. In this study, the AmeriCorps program does not *change* an individual’s orientation to service: individuals join AmeriCorps with different ideas of social change and service, and AmeriCorps makes those ideas more salient and meaningful to the member over time: individuals are changed by the AmeriCorps program and ideology, and while the outcome of that change (reenlisting) is the same for all members, the meaning that that change has for each member varies dramatically.

#### *Why Not Internalize an AmeriCorps Identity?*

These findings also present the argument that things like the AmeriCorps pledge and statements about what an AmeriCorps member *is*, are not empirically supported by close examination of how the typical AmeriCorps member conceives of him or herself. In fact, the ideas that AmeriCorps members are service-oriented, totally altruistic, and committed to social change actually may isolate individuals from the program who do not conceive of themselves in those broad strokes. Members do not report feeling a common identity with other AmeriCorps workers, because they report feeling like they are not “typical” AmeriCorps members. In some

cases, like the case of Robert, individuals do not reenlist for a second year because they do not consider themselves invested in the values of the AmeriCorps program wholeheartedly. This is particularly interesting, because, as shown above, most members report not being “typical,” and in their feeling of being atypical they are actually more of the norm than not. This has major implications for retention and AmeriCorps ideological speech and raises the question: does the stereotypical image of an AmeriCorps worker impede people who do not consider themselves as such from joining or staying in the program?

In light of my findings that AmeriCorps members do form a collective identity around the food stamps and low pay they receive, another question is raised: could the fact AmeriCorps members do not form collective identity in the values and norms of the program be interpreted as an effect of the primacy of pay as an impeding factor to collective identity formation? Could these members be so focused on their immediate life circumstances such as pay to not focus on the broader values of the program? If this is so, then the extrinsic rewards might limit identity formation. However, I found no discussion on primacy of pay in AmeriCorps’ members’ understandings of the goals and values of the program. In fact, even though questions concerning service ideology and collective identity formation occurred after the discussion on pay, members did not suggest that pay affected their collective identity formation in a negative way. Instead, they separated the two spheres: while they may not have formed collective identity around AmeriCorps’ values, it was not because of a focus on extrinsic rewards.

For policy implications, some of the reasons for this non-formation might include the role of the AmeriCorps agency as more of a funding source for various non-profits than a collective community of volunteers. The program might attempt to foster more opportunities for collective identity by promoting only one type of service-orientation, and mandating what service sites must

do to indoctrinate their members into a certain ideology. However, this seems antithetical to the very nature of the AmeriCorps program, and, as shown above, many members appreciate the malleable and individualistic ways they can interpret service in their lives. The fact of the matter is that despite annual trainings, AmeriCorps pledges, and training handbooks individuals use AmeriCorps to further understand their preconceived notions of service, not to dramatically change their identities in ways more befitting the program as a whole.

*Extrinsic Rewards and (malformed?) Collective Identity*

In this work, I did not find that extrinsic rewards diminish collective identity formation. Instead, extrinsic rewards helped individuals foster a collective identity that was not in line with the values of the AmeriCorps program: an identity which must balance the very extrinsic rewards received with real life pursuits and goals.

Surprisingly, many AmeriCorps members discussed extrinsic rewards as a way to maintain a collective identity – or at least to feel more a part of AmeriCorps. This finding points to a possible tool for social movement organizations, the payment, which does not necessarily limit internal drive, but actually adds to it. The extrinsic reward of having a small paycheck did not limit the individual in finding meaning in his or her role as an AmeriCorps members, but instead was one of the few areas where individuals expressed the most camaraderie and internalization of identity. Of course, this becomes a tight rope for social movements to walk. Perhaps, receiving too much money, or having your worth evaluated in terms of money you can bring in as opposed to potential “change” you can make, could be interpreted as devaluing an individual (Fisher 2006). Also, it might imply that the mission you are involved in has lost importance or its grassroots identity (Rochford 1985; Staggenborg 1988). On the other hand, the money AmeriCorps members receive might *not* be an extrinsic reward – because of the low pay

providing more of an opportunity to see institutional poverty first hand – so individuals only further internalize their identity as an AmeriCorps member to mentally compensate for the dissonance of working long hours for low wages.

These findings present many opportunities for further research. Primarily, sociologists need a better understanding of the role of extrinsic motivation on collective identity formation, because this research suggests that there are limitations to the thought that any extrinsic motivation negates internal identity formation. Secondly, further research should analyze the way that individuals interpret the goals and values of AmeriCorps through ethnographic research, or possibly through content analysis of training materials if the analysis is tied in with observing individuals perceptions of self over time. Finally, a comparison study is needed to see the extent of collective identity formation between paid AmeriCorps workers and volunteers at the same sites who receive no extrinsic motivation. Though individuals in the AmeriCorps program say they internalize a subtle sense of service-mindedness, the next logical step in this research process would be to compare that finding to individuals who serve completely without extrinsic rewards. All in all, the AmeriCorps program, because of its large number of members, provides both qualitative and quantitative insights into our sociological understanding of altruism, identity formation, and social movements.

Practically, this research raises more theoretical questions while attempting to answer theoretical questions on extrinsic rewards of its own. Specifically, is it desirable for SMOs to elicit a collective identity in an SMO that is not in line with the values of the SMO, but that does bond and create community in the organization? Do the roles of extrinsic rewards manage to bypass the need for ideological indoctrination, because the extrinsic rewards help form a community of individuals “in the same boat”? In other words, can social movement



organizations benefit from having members internalize a collective identity that helps the goals of the SMO, but is not in line with the identity that the SMO projects on its members? These findings suggest that, for the AmeriCorps program, the answers might be in the affirmative, but more research into this world needs to be conducted to understand these factors for various other SMOs and non-profit organizations.

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Research Paper Title: What's Pay Got to do with it? Collective Identity Formation in the AmeriCorps Program

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